

Walter Schels & Beate Lakotta

Life Before Death

Walter Schels (Landshut, Bavaria, 1936) and **Beate Lakotta** (Kassel, 1965) are a couple who collaborated on the series *Life Before Death* about terminally ill patients. Walter Schels took the photographs and Beate Lakotta wrote the texts, which convey the subjects' thoughts about life and death. The project, made between 2003 and 2004, has been widely exhibited and received several awards. It has resulted in a book, *Noch Mal Leben vor dem Tod*.

Walter Schels discovered photography at the age of fourteen, and went on to develop his skills in New York during the 1960s. In the 1970s he worked for fashion magazines and in advertising. Since documenting the birth of babies in 1975 as a magazine assignment, he has been interested in photographing human life in extreme conditions.

Walter Schels is a member of the Freie Akademie der Künste in Hamburg and an honorary member of the Association of Freelance Photo Designers (BFF). He was selected as Hasselblad Master in 2005.

Beate Lakotta studied German Literature and political science in Heidelberg. Since 1999 she has been on the editorial staff of the science section of the magazine *Der Spiegel*, contributing features on medicine and psychology.

The entire project can be seen at www.noch-mal-leben.de and will be exhibited at Fotoforum West and Westlicht – Schauplatz für Fotografie in Austria in Spring and Summer 2009.

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Aaron Schuman is an American photographer, editor, lecturer and writer, based in the UK. He is a Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer at the Arts Institute in Bournemouth, and a Lecturer at the University of Brighton. He is also the founder and editor of the online photography journal, SeeSaw Magazine – www.seesawmagazine.com

Suddenly Everything Matters ~ Portraits of the dying

by Aaron Schuman

'We all know we have to die, but we just can't believe it,' remarked the photographer Walter Schels at a recent exhibition of his series *Life Before Death: Portraits of the dying*, hosted by London's Wellcome Collection. In collaboration with his partner, the editor and journalist Beate Lakotta, Schels spent more than a year exploring the lives and deaths of twenty-six terminally ill individuals in various hospices across northern Germany. The resulting body of work consists of two photographic portraits of each subject – one made whilst they were alive and another made shortly after their death – accompanied by Lakotta's short, deftly written texts, which are based on the couple's interviews and experiences with each individual, and which bring a concise and often heartrending context to each image. Notably, to both explore and finally believe in their own transience, Schels and Lakotta turned to people who faced an impending death for insight and took photographs to assist them in translating, contemplating and expressing such insight. As Susan Sontag once mused, 'All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability.'

Today a photographic project such as *Life Before Death* may seem like a morbid pursuit, but from its early history the photographic medium has offered distinctive documentation, acknowledgement and commemoration of death and the dead. Many of the earliest daguerreotypes, produced during the 1840s and 1850s, were post-mortem portraits commissioned by the families of the deceased, photographed whilst the corpse was on display in the home; in fact photographers often charged significantly more for such images, partly because they required a house call, partly because the end result was so precious to their clients and, like wedding photography today, they were integral to the ceremony of the event. Surprisingly, even today anthropologists have found evidence that this practice continues in parts of the United States, yet such photographs are rarely displayed or discussed, and are seen as a private matter. The historian Philippe Arles has noted that in the course of the twentieth century society has banished death. 'Everything in town goes on as if nobody died anymore.' Such attempts at banishing death from everyday life have inevitably continued, if not accelerated, in this new century and Western culture continues to encourage the denial of death,



Newborn Baby, 1979 © Walter Schels

increasingly refusing to recognize this inevitability as a natural or normal part of our lives. 'In truth it's a very modern taboo,' Lakotta adds, echoing Arles' notions. 'In former times, people were used to being in contact with the dying and having their loved ones at home when they died. Everybody, even small children, experienced what death looks like, how the last breath sounds, how it feels to touch somebody who is dead. We've lost contact with death and dying.'

Of course today we still encounter images that either directly or indirectly present death on a daily basis, though such exposure is generally restricted to scenes of deliberately shocking extremity – gruesome evidence of violence, war, crime, famine, rampant disease, and so on – or to pictures of remembrance that signal a disastrously premature end – a school portrait, a family photo, or a grinning snapshot of someone relishing a life cut short. Particularly on a personal level we rarely come face to face with death; we tend to avoid it, and if we do happen to view the dead, in a photograph or otherwise, it is generally a deeply unwelcome event.



Heinz Rühmann, Actor, 80 years, 1982 © Walter Schels

Life Before Death derives in part directly from Schels' and Lakotta's own encounters, or absence of encounters, with the dead. Schels points to his own horrific experiences as a child in wartime Germany when his apartment building was bombed; the surviving residents had to collect and bury dismembered bodies of their neighbours, implanting in the young boy a pervasive dread of corpses. Lakotta cites the experience of sitting by her father's bedside in hospital for a week, and then returning home one night to receive a phone call telling her he had died, after which she never saw his face again. 'Our personal motivation behind this work was to face our own mortality; we tried to look very closely at that which scares us most,' she explains. 'Our wish was to overcome our own fears about death and dying. And maybe that's a desire that other people share with us.'

Aesthetically, Schels' photographic approach is remarkably traditional and reserved in comparison to most contemporary work within the medium: straight black-and-white headshots, made in exquisitely sculptural light, generally against a black background, with a deep crispness and tonal clarity that Edward Weston would have admired. It is precisely such restraint in the face of difficult circumstances that bestow Schels' live and deceased portraits with a unique, tangible and affecting weight, balanced on the border between honesty and tenderness. Rather than romanticizing or confronting us with a stark reality these images invite the viewer to engage directly with death on a deeply personalized basis, and at the same time allow just enough emotional distance and perspective for more abstract ruminations on mortality in general.

The photographer Thomas Ruff once argued that 'Photography can only reproduce the surface of things,' and famously illustrated the point through his intentionally ambiguous or neutralized headshots which are often misinterpreted as a confirmation of the futility of photography. Yet Ruff's argument was far more complex than a simple negation of his own medium; it was a candid acknowledgement of the overriding authority of the viewer within photography, and a bold surrender to the power of

the audience. 'What people see, eventually, is only what's already inside them,' Ruff explained, or as Schels himself has said of *Life Before Death*, 'This work recalls a knowledge we just don't want to realize.'

What is ultimately so effective about these works is that, despite the initial terror and subsequent sadness they may inspire, the project presents us with deaths which were expected, imminent, and much as we might not like to admit it, rather ordinary. Although Lakotta's texts poignantly convey the tragic personal circumstances of each subject, such stories are neither rare nor exceptional. The fates that befell these individuals – cancer, heart disease, the failings of old age – are common, and even though we may hate to dwell on it, they take the lives of thousands every day and are likely to take our own. Furthermore, like Lakotta's carefully edited words, Schels' intimate live portraits respectfully reveal hope, fear, exhaustion, pride and dignity, captivating our attention through an acutely observed sense of shared humanity, rather than through what could be, in the hands of a lesser photographer, a crass exploitation of either the subject's suffering or the viewer's own pity and compassion.

Interestingly, in the death images, the subjects inevitably lack any facial expression and consequently read more like still-lives. As with the photographic image, the faces themselves have been transformed into inviting yet resolutely ambiguous representations; they are now simply, as Ruff puts it, reproductions of the 'surface of things', which are as dependent on the viewer's internal perspective as they are on the actual experiences of either the photographer or the subject. Of course such perspectives change from viewer to viewer and throughout the course of each individual's own lifetime – as does one's relationship to mortality – and perhaps this is precisely why such direct encounters, even with the surface of death, really do matter. Perhaps, as Sontag proposed, both the photograph and the act of photographing offer an ideal perspective on, representation of and reminder of the experience of dying itself. As one of *Life Before Death's* most striking subjects, Wolfgang Kotzahn, so elegantly stated just days before his own passing, 'I'm lying here waiting to die... [and] now I see everything from a totally different perspective: every cloud outside my window, every flower in the vase. Suddenly, everything matters.'

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